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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 000314

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: BARAK WARNS HIZBALLAH, GOL AND SARG OF "PAINFUL"
ISRAELI RESPONSE

REF: TEL AVIV 273

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Minister of Defense Barak issued a series of tough warnings earlier this week intended to deter an expected Hizballah attack on Israel or Israeli interests abroad. Barak also sent signals to the governments of Lebanon and Syria that the IDF would target Lebanese state interests in the event of a Hizballah attack and may also take military action if Syria transfers more advanced weapons to Hizballah. Barak's messages are part of Israeli efforts to restore Israel's deterrence toward a range of potential foes, but were likely also motivated by political considerations in advance of Israel's February 10 general elections. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In response to continuing threats by Hizballah leaders that Hizballah is planning to take revenge on Israel for the February 12, 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Minister of Defense Ehud Barak toured the IDF's Northern Command February 3. Barak's visit to the north was heavily covered by the Israeli media. He took advantage of the opportunity to issue a stern warning to Hizballah, as well as to the Syrian and Lebanese governments, that Israel will not quietly absorb attacks or tolerate Syrian transfers of more advanced weapons systems to Hizballah. Noting the upcoming anniversary of the Mughniyeh assassination, Barak warned, "I do not recommend that Hizballah test us. The outcome could be more painful than they think." Barak added that the Lebanese government bears overall responsibility for Hizballah's actions since Hizballah is a part of the government. An Israeli television commentator who accompanied Barak reported that Barak's message to the GOL was clear: Israel will target the Lebanese state and not just Hizballah in the event of a Hizballah attack on Israel.

¶3. (SBU) Barak also warned Syria against transferring more advanced weapons systems to Hizballah. Without getting into specifics, Barak stated "There are systems capable of tipping the status quo in Lebanon and we will need to consider our response should they be transferred." In his address to the annual Herzliyya Conference the evening of February 3, Barak, with an eye toward Israel's February 10 general elections, balanced tough and conciliatory messages. He cautioned that "Israel will not spare those who try to attack us. We will destroy our enemies, but with deliberation." He then added that Israel should take the initiative to work for peace with Syria and Lebanon as well as the Palestinians, noting that he supported President Shimon Peres' ideas that Israel should offer its own regional peace initiative in response to the Arab Initiative.

¶4. (C) Comment. Some analysts have suggested that Barak's caution in responding to continued incidents of rocket fire from Gaza over the past week is related to his and the IDF's desire to avoid being dragged into further hostilities in the

south while a Hizballah threat looms in the north. We have little doubt that in the event of a Hizballah provocation, the IDF, with Barak's approval, has prepared a disproportionate response against Lebanese targets as part of their ongoing effort to restore Israel's deterrent capability. Barak's message apparently is playing well with Israeli voters. During a tour of the popular Machane Yehuda market in Jerusalem February 4, Israel television filmed a local resident telling the Defense Minister that he had "given us back our self-respect."

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